

# Constantine the Great: Rome's first Christian emperor?

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Constantine 'the Great' was acclaimed as Augustus by the army on 25th July A.D. 306. This anniversary is currently being celebrated with a trio of international exhibitions: the first at Rimini in 2005, the second taking place currently at the Yorkshire Museum in York, and the third in Trier in 2007. The location of York for the actual anniversary is not surprising: as the curator of the exhibition 'Constantine the Great: York's Roman Emperor', Elizabeth Hartley, notes, the story of Constantine begins in York. It was in York, after the death of his father, the emperor Constantius, that Constantine was offered the greatest prize the empire had to offer. This prize was not to be so easily won, however, and it took a series of military victories and tactical murders before Constantine was able to rule, and maintain his power, as sole Augustus from 324.

That same year Constantine issued a proclamation, a fragment of which is preserved on a papyrus in the British Museum. In this text, addressed to the eastern provinces of the empire, Constantine reflected on the divine providence which had led him thus far:

*It is not vainglorious, for one who acknowledges the beneficence of the Almighty, to make boast thereof. It was He who sought out my service, and judged it fitting for the achievement of His own purpose. Starting from that British sea and those lands where the sun is ordained to set, He repulsed and scattered by His divine might the encompassing powers of evil, to the end that the human race might be recalled to the worship of the supreme law, schooled by my helping hand, and that the most blessed faith might be increased with the Almighty as Guide.*

## Constantine's 'Almighty'

Constantine's claim to a special relationship with the Divine was of course nothing new for a Roman emperor. However, the identity of Constantine's 'Almighty', as well as that of the 'supreme law', is crucial. Scholars often talk about a trend towards 'pagan monotheism' in Late Antiquity, focusing in particular on the special interest in the god Sol Invictus, 'Unconquered Sun', shown by the emperors immediately preceding Constantine. However, there was another god with a special relationship with Constantine: Apollo. An anonymous panegyrist claimed that the emperor had also seen the god Apollo in a vision:

*For, O Constantine, you saw, I believe, your protector Apollo, in company with Victory, offering you laurel crowns.... But why indeed do I say 'I believe'? You really saw the god and recognized yourself in the appearance of one to whom the prophecies of poets have declared that the rule of the whole world should belong.*

## Conquer by this

Nevertheless, it is the story of the emperor's conversion to Christianity the night before the battle of the Milvian Bridge (at which he defeated his rival Maxentius near Rome) in 312 that

has passed into legend. The version told by Constantine's own adoring biographer, the bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, goes like this:

*Being convinced, however, that he needed some more powerful aid than his military forces could afford him... he sought Divine assistance, deeming the possession of arms and a numerous soldiery of secondary importance, but believing the co-operating power of a Deity invincible and not to be shaken. He considered, therefore, on what God he might rely for protection and assistance... And while he was thus praying with fervent entreaty, a most marvellous sign appeared to him from heaven... He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription CONQUER BY THIS. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle.*

Armed in this way, Constantine's army went on to defeat the enemy. And so, we are told, the Roman emperor had become a Christian, and the world would never be the same again. Henceforth the emperor would not only cease to persecute the Church, but he would give to it generously, in the form of tax exemptions and gifts, and would even involve himself in church disputes (this last activity was not to the liking of all Christians – but that is another story!).

## Scandalous motives

The nature of Constantine's conversion has always been a topic of controversy. His motivations for turning to the Christian faith were looked upon with suspicion by sceptics, including the historian Zosimus, whose pro-pagan *New History* was written in the early sixth century. Zosimus picks up on a tradition which was highly unfavourable to the emperor:

*Without any consideration for natural law he killed his son Crispus on suspicion of having had intercourse with his step-mother Fausta. And when Constantine's mother Helena was saddened by this atrocity and could not accept this murder, Constantine, as if to comfort her, applied a remedy worse than the disease: he ordered a bath to be over-heated, and shut Fausta up in it until she was dead. Since he was himself aware of his guilt and of his disregard for oaths as well, he approached the priests seeking absolution, but they said there was no kind of purge which could absolve him of such impieties. A certain Egyptian, who had come from Spain and was intimate with the ladies of the court, met Constantine and assured him that the Christian religion was able to absolve him from guilt and that it promised every wicked man who was converted to it immediate release from all sin.*

This story is cleverly plausible in that Constantine did indeed murder both his son and his own wife (as well as his wife's father and brother!). However, chronology shows that the story is

clearly bogus: Fausta and Crispus were murdered in 326, long after Constantine's 'conversion'. Nonetheless, the idea that Christianity was uniquely powerful as a religion which could provide absolution for even the most grievous of sins was popular amongst its detractors. In addition, the idea of the dubious foreign religious figure, first converting women, and thereby insinuating himself to the more important 'converttee', is also widespread in religious debate in late antiquity. (Women were generally considered to be more susceptible to foreign 'superstitions'.) Finally, the success of this story is demonstrated by the fact that the church historian Sozomen felt the need to issue a riposte to the story in his own *Ecclesiastical History*.

### Persistent paganism

By the time Zosimus was writing, the notion of the Christian Constantine (however dubiously so!) was very much fixed: non-Christians of the sixth century were forced to live in a Christian world, whether they liked it or not, and to keep their religion firmly in the closet. However, the story of Constantine's conversion as an unambiguously 'Christian' event would not have seemed nearly so unambiguous closer to the time. While it suited the bishop Eusebius to promote an entirely Christian image of his emperor, as soon as he decently could, not all contemporary images of the emperor were Christian. The emperor continued to issue coins representing the deity Sol Invictus (i.e. the god especially favoured by his predecessors who had been notorious for their persecution of the Christians!) after his 'conversion'. The practices of the imperial cult continued, along with the other traditional rituals of Greco-Roman religion. 'Paganism' would not be outlawed for many years to come. In the eyes of contemporary Christian authors the conversion of Constantine could be read as having swept in a new, Christian age, but as later Christian writers (such as Augustine) were to find out, the world would not and could not change over night.

How should we as historians today understand Constantine's conversion? Several eminent modern scholars of Constantine have opted for a rationalist, 'scientific' approach to Constantine's conversion. They suggest that what the emperor actually saw at the Milvian bridge was an example of the relatively well-attested 'halo phenomenon', whereby the sun shining through ice crystals in the atmosphere produces a rainbow-like effect. However, we may well feel that this explanation does not get us very far. (For instance, it does not help us with Constantine's vision of Apollo!)

The 'special relationship' between emperor and god certainly took a new turn with Constantine – so much so that eventually the emperor would become, in the eyes of the Eastern Church, St Constantine. However, this change would be far more complex than can be understood by reference either to ice crystals or Egyptian charlatans. What is undeniable is that Constantine did move decisively towards a marked preference for the Christian religion, a move that, however gradual it might have actually been, would have a massive effect on the history of the Roman Empire, and beyond. The 'conversion' of Constantine, meanwhile, can be read in a number of ways: as a miracle, a case of ice crystals, a sham, or even a historical red herring, depending on your standpoint. History, we should remember, is not the same as biography and, however we understand the conversion of Constantine, this story alone cannot explain the religious transformation of the ancient world in Late Antiquity. That process would take far longer, and would be even more controversial than the emperor's own conversion.

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